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ABSTRACT

A study examined reasons that adult female students are motivated to enroll in distance learning programs, described their perceptions of the courses, and identified barriers these women face as they attempt to progress through their degree programs. Results of focus groups with 40 returning adult women were analyzed. Their needs were grouped into these five general categories: needs involving communication with instructors; needs surrounding interactions with other students; needs involving support services provided by the campus; and personal needs, including support of spouses, family members, and employers. Themes from focus groups were then used to develop an online survey that was administered to 400 men and women enrolled in online courses. Findings suggested women return to college primarily for job-related reasons and deliberately select programs delivered via distance education because of the convenience of online courses and other types of distance education courses delivered at sites near their homes. Although, in general, students were satisfied with these programs and the programs appeared to enable women to balance school, work, and family demands, in some areas distance education programs still fell short of meeting student needs and expectations. Concerns were lack of feedback from instructors, lack of technical support, and inadequate advisement and student services. (Contains 22 references.) (YLB)

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Identifying the Needs of Adult Women in Distance Learning Programs

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Distance learning technologies have the capability to extend opportunities and to alleviate problems for adult women interested in continuing their education at colleges or universities. To create environments that support adult female students in distance learning programs, educators must possess an understanding of the characteristics and needs of these learners. In this study, the researchers conducted focus groups with 40 returning adult women and surveyed 400 male and female students enrolled in distance education courses. Most of these students had returned to college for job-related reasons and were enrolled in distance education courses because of the convenience and flexibility associated with this type of delivery format. The results of the focus groups were analyzed, and the women's needs were grouped into five general categories: needs involving communication with instructors; needs surrounding interactions with other students; needs for technical assistance; needs involving support services provided by the campus; and personal needs, including the support of spouses, family members, and employers. Themes from the focus groups were then used to develop an on-line survey that was administered to 400 men and women enrolled in on-line courses. The survey data were then analyzed and differences in responses by gender were identified in a few areas. Faculty, support staff, and administrators may use the findings of this study to design and implement distance learning programs that meet the needs of adult learners.

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The Issue/Problem

Women return to college for a number of reasons including career advancement, higher wages, or personal fulfillment (American Association of University Women, 1999). Research on returning adult female students, however, has shown that many of these women face significant barriers that prevent them from completing their undergraduate degrees. Internal barriers often exist, including fear of failure or a lack of self-confidence regarding their ability to succeed in educational settings (Gorback, 1994). For many women, the necessity of balancing a job, family, community, and academic responsibilities can be a major challenge (McNulty, 1992). Programs offered via distance learning technologies may offer adult female students greater access to academic programs and increased flexibility in scheduling their coursework.

Currently, more than half of the higher education institutions in the United States offer courses via print, audio, video, computer, or Internet-based technologies, and this percentage is expected to increase dramatically in the next five years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Most distance education programs operate in an extremely competitive environment in an attempt to attract adult students and enrollments are increasing accordingly (Parks, 1997). To understand this growth, it is important to examine the reasons students enroll in these programs. According to recent studies, students consider several factors when selecting a distance learning program, including institutional reputation, program availability, program quality, service quality, and costs (Mowen & Parks, 1997). In addition, adult women students may be more likely to select a distance learning program because of the way it fits with the other demands in their lives, including work, family, and community obligations (Harvey, 1995). In fact, most studies of distance learners in North American higher education institutions report that more women than men are enrolled in distance education courses (Burge, 1998).

Although distance learning technologies may eliminate some of the barriers faced by returning adult female students, the physical distance between the students and the campus may create other types of barriers.

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It is estimated that nearly 70% of students who enter distance education programs drop out, permanently or temporarily, before program completion (Parks, 1997). Although little research has been conducted in this area, a number of hypotheses have been developed to explain this high attrition rate. It has been suggested that students who are not in the same location as their peers and instructors experience isolation and a lack of individual attention (Martinez & Sweger, 1996). Support services may not be available for these students, or the distance between the students and the campus may prohibit students from utilizing the existing campus resources and services. Female students may have less experience in working with technology than do their male counterparts and may become frustrated with distance learning courses that require extensive use of computers (Brunner & Bennett, 1998).

Educators should examine the characteristics of returning female students and identify their needs in order to design effective programs and to develop institutional plans to provide the academic and support services needed to improve degree completion rates (Horne, 1998). More research is needed to help assess female perceptions of the educational environment and its importance to learning, particularly in distance learning programs (Gee, 1995).

Theoretical Framework and Purpose of the Study

Limited information is available for adult educators to use in planning academic programs for non-traditional female university students, particularly when programs are delivered via distance learning technologies. Female students enrolled in distance education programs have diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and vary greatly in age, marital status, educational background, and work experience (Taylor & Marienau, 1992). Their motivations for participating in distance learning programs may vary considerably. According to the literature, there are several basic reasons that adults seek additional formal education, including a tendency toward self-direction, learning needs that are generated by real-life problems, and the desire to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills (Garrison, 1989). Motivation in adult learners can be intrinsic, driven by the need for autonomy or personal growth, or instrumental, impelled by social and environmental pressures (Harvey, 1995). For returning adult women students, the reasons for participation in distance education programs may be either intrinsic or instrumental and may be related to personal, financial, social, humanitarian, or career concerns.

With the number of distance education programs increasing each year, it is important to understand the reasons students enroll in these programs. Because distance education is a relatively recent trend in the education marketplace, there are often questions regarding the quality and integrity of such programs (Mowen & Parks, 1997). Currently, distance education programs operate in an extremely competitive environment as they attempt to attract adult students. Overall, students seeking a particular distance learning program consider several factors including institutional reputation, program availability and quality, service quality, and costs (Mowen & Parks, 1997). In addition, female students take into consideration the way a program fits with the other demands in their lives, including work, family, and community obligations (Harvey, 1995).

Effective distance learning programs have relied heavily on the principles and theories of adult education. Existing research in this field may assist distance education instructors in meeting the needs of adult female students. Educators working in distance education environments need to recognize the unique characteristics of adult learners and base instructional strategies on these characteristics (McNulty, 1992). Curriculum, teaching methods, and evaluation procedures may need to deviate from traditional classroom practices (Morgan, Ponticell, & Gordon, 1998). Distance education instructors must utilize a variety of communication tools to combat the isolation often experienced by distance learners and to keep the class members connected to the instructor and each other (Winfield, 1998). Educators teaching distance learning courses must also realize that there is a significant gender gap in technology use, and that many adult students, both male and female, may need additional assistance to participate in distance education courses, particularly courses that are delivered via computer-based technologies.

Although individual faculty members, drawing from theory or practice, may develop or modify specific courses to make them more effective for distance learners, institutional changes need to occur as well. Often students enrolled in distance education programs feel they are "separate and unequal" to students enrolled in traditional undergraduate programs and may encounter several barriers in pursuit of their degrees (Rose 1995). Many institutions of higher education are being forced to examine their traditional policies, procedures, and practices to meet the needs of these new populations.

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Research has indicated that there are three stages of institutional adaptation to adult female students (Copland, 1988). During the first two stages, special courses, including distance education courses, may be initiated and implemented, but the institution itself changes very little. It is only in the final stage that female adult students, including those studying at a distance, achieve equity with traditional students and the learning environment actively supports this non-traditional population. During this stage, senior administrators become aware of the unique needs of female adult learners. There is active recruitment of women students and aggressive marketing of non-traditional and distance learning programs. Support services are offered by mail, phone, or on-line. Efforts are initiated to increase retention and completion rates of women in distance education programs.

To create learning environments that support adult female students in distance education programs and facilitate retention and degree completion, faculty, staff, and administrators must possess knowledge and understanding of the characteristics and needs of these learners (Pohjonen, 1997). Educators and program directors must be able to identify the factors that motivate adult women to enroll in programs. They must also acknowledge and attempt to remove the barriers that exist for these students. The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons that adult female students are motivated to enroll in distance learning programs, to describe their perceptions of the courses, and to identify the barriers that these women face as they attempt to progress through their degree programs. Administrators and faculty members in higher education institutions will use this information to develop programs, design courses, and create learning environments that enable women to complete undergraduate programs offered via distance education technologies.

Specific Questions the Study is Designed to Address

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate adult women to enroll in distance learning programs to complete their college degrees?
2. What factors influence adult female students' selection of specific institutions or distance learning programs?
3. How do adult women in distance learning courses describe their experience as compared with the traditional college classroom?
4. What barriers hinder adult women in distance learning programs from completing their undergraduate degrees?
5. How can educational institutions create supportive learning environments for all students enrolled in distance learning programs?

Data Collection and Analysis

The methodology for this study involved both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Following an extensive literature review, the researchers, in consultation with the University of Wisconsin Extension Survey Research Laboratory, developed an interview guide. The guide was reviewed by a small group of experts in the field of adult education. Focus groups were held with small groups of respondents to encourage group interaction around the questions included in the interview guide (Swanson, Watkins, & Marsick, 1997). A total of 40 women, who were enrolled in distance learning courses at four public and private colleges and universities, responded to the interview questions. Twenty women participated in face-to-face focus groups. Another 20 women participated in "virtual" focus groups that were conducted via the Internet using discussion software. All focus groups were conducted during the 1999-2000 academic year. Data from all of the focus groups were transcribed and were analyzed by the researchers with the assistance of two faculty members from the University of Georgia.

The findings from the focus groups were then used to generate items for an on-line survey. The survey included 40 items in five general categories. These categories had emerged as themes in the focus groups and included student interactions with instructors; student interactions with other students; student interactions with campus support staff; student interactions with family members, friends and employers; and overall course satisfaction. The survey was administered to 400 students enrolled in on-line courses at 15

public and private universities, located primarily in Wisconsin and two other states, during the 2000-2001 academic year. The survey results were then analyzed to determine overall responses to each item as well as to determine if there were significant differences between the responses of men and women.

Findings

There were some key differences in the demographic profiles of the focus group participants and survey respondents. The survey respondents included male students, as well as, female students. The average age of the focus group participants was 35.9 years, although participant ages ranged from a 19-year-old single mother to a 51-year-old grandmother. More than half of the focus group participants, 60% were married and another 10.3% were members of unmarried couples. Nearly three quarters of the participants, 73%, had at least one child living in their households. The average age of the youngest child in the household was 8 years old. Nearly two-thirds of the participants, 64%, were employed full-time outside the home, and another 20% worked part-time or less than 40 hours per week. All women were degree-seeking students enrolled in at least one interactive television or Internet-based course at the time of the study. All of the participants had previously completed coursework in a traditional college or university classroom.

Of the survey respondents, 71% were women and 65% were 23 years of age or older. Ages of the survey participants ranged from 18 to 62. All of the participants had previously completed coursework in a traditional college or university classroom. Slightly more than half, 51%, of the respondents were enrolled in their first distance education course and another 25% were enrolled in their second on-line course.

Focus Group Results

Although the literature states that adult women return to college for a number of reasons, the women in this study had sought additional education primarily for job-related reasons. Approximately 75% of the respondents indicated they were enrolled in a distance learning program to progress in their chosen careers or to change occupations. In many cases, a college degree was required for the woman to advance within her organization. Other respondents said they had returned to college for personal reasons, including fulfilling individual goals and serving as a role model for family members.

As suggested in the literature (Harvey, 1995) approximately 75% of the women had deliberately chosen a program delivered via distance learning technologies, primarily for the convenience associated with taking courses on-line or at remote sites near home or work. The courses offered them much greater flexibility as they juggled work, family, and educational responsibilities. Typical responses of the participants included, "This type of program allows me to spend as much time as possible at home with my family," "The flexibility provided through this program allows me to continue my education and keep my job," and "I had been thinking about returning to school for several years but because of my schedule I knew I couldn't commit to weekly classes."

However, approximately one-fourth of the respondents were interested in obtaining a specific degree (such as library science or computer science) and the fact that the degree was delivered via distance learning technologies was a secondary reason for selecting a particular program. Typical responses of these individuals were, "I have been in the computer programming industry for seven years and felt that if I wanted to continue in my chosen field, I needed a college diploma," and "I wanted to add library certification to my certification as an elementary teacher as it will make me more marketable in the public schools."

In addition to considering the nature of the degree and the type of delivery system, participants reported other major considerations when selecting a program, including the location of the institution, the reputation of the institution, and whether the program would accept transfer credits earned at other institutions. The cost of the program appeared to be a relatively minor factor and was mentioned by few participants. However, several respondents indicated that they received at least partial, if not full, tuition reimbursement from their employers for continuing their education.

When asked to compare their distance education courses to traditional classroom experiences, the vast majority of respondents stated that the instructor was the key to a positive learning experience in all types of learning environments. Many of the participants said that course quality depends more on the teacher than how the class is delivered. Several examples of both outstanding and ineffective instruction in both traditional and

distance learning courses were provided to support this assertion. However, nearly one-third, 30%, of the participants felt that they did not have sufficient interaction with the instructors or receive adequate feedback from the instructors in their distance education courses. "I had no idea if I was doing the assignments the right way. I e-mailed the instructor twice and didn't get any response back," said one frustrated student. "I e-mailed a half a dozen times, called countless times and never even got an answering machine...(it) gave me the feeling that the instructor didn't really care," said another. These students went on to explain how difficult it was to maintain their motivation for continuing in the course when they received so little feedback from the instructors.

When asked about interactions with the other students, participants' opinions were mixed. Several participants said they missed the discussions associated with a traditional classroom; yet, approximately the same number indicated that they participated more in on-line discussions than they had in traditional class discussions. Typical comments on this topic included, "I felt more comfortable expressing my opinions on-line than I ever did in a classroom," and "The on-line discussions are more focused and more interesting." Despite being physically separated from each other, the students appeared to have a great deal of informal communication with the other students in their classes. However, in cases where informal communication was more predominant than interactions with the instructor, problems occurred. "I researched for weeks and wrote a good paper, and then I heard that other people copied theirs off the Internet, yet we all received A's," said one participant.

Although technology continues to evolve and become more reliable, technical problems related to the courses were perceived to be a frustration by many of the participants. The majority of the participants had experienced some type of technical problem during one or more of their courses. Server problems, network problems, software problems, and slow transmission speeds were all cited as major or minor annoyances by the participants. In general, the participants believed that they and their instructors required a more extensive orientation to the technology than was provided. Levels of technical support appeared to vary among institutions. Some campuses provided technical assistance to students, and in other cases students relied on the instructor to answer technical questions.

When the participants were asked about the barriers they faced in pursuing their degrees, a single theme emerged. With the exception of the students enrolled in the private institutions, the participants believed that the institutions they were enrolled in were structured to meet the needs of students in traditional face-to-face courses, not students in distance learning courses. Barriers participants mentioned included campuses where offices were not staffed during evening and weekend hours; administrative services that were not made available electronically; and problems obtaining textbooks, library access, and other instructional resources. Although most participants had been assigned an advisor, they didn't believe they were receiving sufficient information regarding course offerings and degree requirements. "One disadvantage to being an 'on-line student' is that there seems to be little support in terms of advising or other services," said one participant. Several participants felt that whenever they contacted the campus they were transferred from office to office and that few staff members understood their unique needs and requirements.

Participants also mentioned barriers that were external to the colleges and universities. "My primary barriers are time constraints with work, family, and school," said one participant. Although participants generally spoke of their spouses and children as supporting their educational efforts, the demands of their jobs or their families often required the women to drop out for a semester or longer. Participants spoke of their employers as encouraging, yet it appeared that oral encouragement and financial support were more readily available than time off or flexible hours needed to complete course requirements.

The concern regarding time constraints was significant; the majority of respondents believed that distance learning courses were very time consuming. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents believed that to be successful in a distance education course, they had to be more self-directed, more motivated, and extend more effort than when they were students in a traditional classroom. Although the majority of participants indicated that they were successful in adapting to the requirements of on-line courses, several expressed frustration over the amount of time needed to complete each course. Many of the participants were concerned about "efficiency" and indicated that if the courses weren't so time intensive, they could complete more courses each year and complete their degrees in a shorter amount of time.

Despite the fact that most of the participants indicated that there were problems with courses, programs, and support services, all of the women said they planned to continue taking distance learning courses. Although they had encountered difficulties in many areas, only a very small number had actually

made formal or informal complaints to their colleges or universities. Many of the women were highly focused on achieving their degrees and were willing to overlook or work around all kinds of environmental barriers. Others seemed to view the situation as a compromise. "Although there have been a lot of hassles, it is worth it just to be able to have the flexibility to take courses and study when it fits my schedule," stated one participant.

Survey Results

The survey addressed the same issues with distance education courses as the focus groups. In the area of student interactions with instructors, survey participants were much more positive in their responses than the focus group participants. Nearly all, 94%, of the respondents indicated that the instructor responded promptly to their message, 87% indicated that they were receiving adequate feedback on their performance, and 84% believed their instructors were spending an adequate amount of time working with the students in the courses. A third of the respondents believed it was important to actually see what their instructors looked like and nearly half of the students, 46%, felt it was important to meet with the instructor, even in an on-line course.

Much like the focus groups, the survey respondents were mixed in their opinions regarding interactions with other students. Although 62% of the students felt more comfortable expressing ideas in an on-line course than in a traditional classroom, 72% believed that it was difficult to work in groups in an on-line course and 84% preferred to work on assignments and projects by themselves. Nearly half of the students, 48%, felt impatient with other "on-line" students while 10% were offended by the written comments of other students. Fewer than half, 41%, of the respondents was interested in meeting their on-line classmates.

As in the focus groups, survey respondents expressed frustration with the technology involved in distance learning courses. Although the vast majority, 88%, of the students had received adequate information on hardware and software requirements, 35% of the students reported being frequently frustrated by technology. More than half, 61%, relied on their instructors for technical support and a third, 33 %, relied on other students for technical assistance.

Survey participants reported mixed satisfaction with other support services provided by the campus. Overall, there were high levels of satisfaction associated with registration processes and library resources with more than 90% of the students expressing high levels of satisfaction in those areas. However, 21% of the students reported difficulties in obtaining financial aid, 15% reported difficulties in obtaining textbooks and 40% were unable to pay tuition "on-line" using credit cards. Although 90% of the respondents knew whom to contact for academic advising, 44% relied on their instructor to provide advising.

For most respondents, others in their lives were very supportive of their efforts: 94% received encouragement from spouses/partners, 96% received encouragement from friends and 94% (of those with children) believed that on-line courses made childcare more manageable. The vast majority of survey respondents, 90%, believed that taking on-line courses made it easier to maintain employment while enrolled in college. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents received at least some tuition reimbursement from employers.

Despite some difficulties, such as technical problems, problems with various support services, and difficulty with group work, the survey respondents reported a high level of overall satisfaction with their on-line courses. Eighty-seven percent indicated that the course met their expectations. This same percentage indicated that they would enroll in another on-line course and would recommend their course to a friend. Eighty-four percent believed their university meets the needs of on-line students.

In 90% of the survey items, there were no significant differences between the responses of men and the responses of women. Consistent with the literature, female students reported being more comfortable expressing their ideas on-line and were less likely to want to meet their other classmates in person. Female respondents also reported that they received more encouragement from spouses/partners and friends than male respondents.

Impact

The findings of this study suggest that women are returning to college primarily for job-related reasons and that they are deliberately selecting programs delivered via distance education because of the convenience associated with on-line courses and other types of distance education courses delivered at sites near their

homes. Although in general, students are satisfied with these programs and the programs appear to enable women to balance school, work, and family demands, in some areas distance education programs still fall short of meeting student needs and expectations. Lack of feedback from instructors, lack of technical support, inadequate advisement, and student services were common concerns of the women included in the focus groups. Distance learners, both male and female, who participated in the on-line survey, also expressed frustration with technology and with the lack of available support services in some areas. In addition, survey respondents indicated a lack of satisfaction in their interactions with other students when engaged in group activities.

To meet the needs of these learners better, faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education institutions should consider a number of factors when designing distance learning programs for returning adult students. Educators working in distance education environments need to recognize the unique characteristics of adult learners and acknowledge the diversity that exists among these students in terms of educational and life experiences (Burge, 1998). The diversity in the demographics of both focus group and survey participants reinforce the importance of designing instruction to meet the needs of an extremely diverse student group in terms of age, gender, marital/family, and employment status.

Learning experiences appropriate to adult learners continue to be discussed by educators, but with insufficient attention to technology application (Burge, 1998) Instructors must realize that they are the key to making distance learning courses successful. When instructors design courses so there is little interaction or pay inadequate attention to students, they may drive students away from programs or cause students to become disengaged from the learning process (Burge, 1998). This feeling of disengagement was expressed by a number of women in this study. Distance education instructors must make continual use of a variety of communication tools and instructional strategies to enhance the motivation of distance learners to foster student-to-student interactions (Thiele, Allen, & Stucky, 1999). Otherwise, students, such as those that completed the on-line survey, may continue to prefer to work independently, not realizing the benefits of cooperative or collaborative learning.

Although individual faculty members may develop or modify specific courses to make them more effective for distance learners, institutional changes need to occur as well in order for these students to become fully satisfied with their educational experiences. Often students enrolled in distance education programs, including many of the participants in this study, feel they are "separate and unequal" to students enrolled in traditional undergraduate programs (Rose, 1995). Programs should be designed with the student perspective in mind by educators who understand that distance learners need and expect a responsive program (Granger & Benke, 1998).

Institutions of higher education that plan to offer distance learning courses must examine and revise their traditional policies, procedures, and practices in order to meet the needs of these students. Administrative processes need to be simple, convenient, and automatic while administrative services, such as registration and financial aid, should be available via phone, fax, computers and other electronic means (Granger & Benke, 1998). Support services, including technical support, advising, and other services currently available to traditional students, should be made readily available to distance learners. All support service staff should recognize that they have a responsibility to address the specific concerns of distance learners.

Programs should also be designed so that learners can help themselves; this may involve providing students with an intensive orientation to the program, as well as, with extensive print and electronic resources, including on-line advising tools. Distance learning programs should be evaluated frequently, and feedback from students should be utilized to continually improve the learning process and environment. The capacity of higher education institutions to serve distance learners effectively depends on the ability to obtain information on student needs and expectations from potential and current students and the ability to design programs and support systems to meet these needs.

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